

Chapter 106: Something Shady

Jory's kitchen table was covered in magical diagrams, with Belinda taking Clive through how they worked.

"Obviously, the lock is impervious to ordinary intrusion," she explained. "I re-sequenced the magical bursts into an irregular pattern. It doesn't throw-off any individual element, but..."

"...it accumulates small errors that cause the whole thing to break down," Clive finished. "That brilliant. How did you come up with that?"

"I was working on something a while back. I was stuck using low-quality sequencing rods and I didn't realise what was happening until the misalignment crashed the whole rig. I came up with this while troubleshooting."

"Brilliant," Clive said. "Adversity driving innovation."

Jory's assistant, Janice, knocked on the door as she came in.

"Mr Asano says she's awake. You can go and see your friend now."

They all went back downstairs, Janice heading back to reception while Clive and Belinda went to the treatment room where Sophie was locked up. Jason was outside, leaning against the wall. He was watching an image being projected onto the opposite wall by a small crystal.

"How is she?" Belinda asked.

"She's trying to pick the lock right now," Jason said, "so I'm guessing fine."

Clive gestured at the wall opposite and they saw Sophie, from above and behind, hunched over the door lock. The three of them stood looking at the door as five runes lit up around the doorknob.

"Five-element lock," Belinda said. "Not bad for an internal door."

"Jory keeps some expensive supplies in these rooms," Jason said.

"Good to know," Belinda said.

"Please don't steal them," Jason said.

"I don't think she'd do that," Clive said.

"No, I would," Belinda told him.

The runes on the door moved until they formed a straight line and the lock clicked. The door opened just enough for Sophie to look out.

"Didn't I ask you specifically not to do that?" Jason asked her.

Sophie groaned in dissatisfaction, but Belinda threw the door wide to ensnare her friend in a huge hug.

"I'm so glad you're alright."

"You too."

Jason gestured at the room Sophie had just broken out of.

"You can talk in there," he said. "Clive, can you do something to the door to stop them opening it up again?"

"To stop her," he said, nodding at Sophie, "probably."

Then he gestured at Belinda.

"To stop her, probably not."

Jason groaned.

"Just go in and talk," Jason said.

Belinda gently pushed Sophie back into the room, closing the door behind them. She looked around until she spotted the far-seeing crystal Jason had been using to watch the room, floating unobtrusively near the ceiling. She stood up on a chair to take it down and shove it in a drawer.

"What was that?" Sophie asked.

"He was watching you."

"What a creeper."

"You did try and break out."

"I didn't try; I did break out."

"How are you?" Blind asked.

"I feel alright, Sophie said. "A bit withered on the vine. Has it really been days?"

"It has."

Sophie sat down on the chair, shuffling to find a posture where the manacles didn't bother her too much. Belinda hopped up to sit on the treatment table.

"So," Sophie said. "What did they tell you?"

"Ventress, Magic Society guy, indenture."

"The same for me. What are they after?"

"I'm not sure. According to Asano, he only came after us because someone asked him to. People at the Adventure Society were getting pressured over how long it was taking to catch us."

"Do you believe him?"

"I'm not sure. He seems to be in charge, or at least, the others are taking cues from him. He's hard to read, but his partner, not so much."

"That's the one that caught you?"

"Yeah. He's all book smarts; more interested in how we did the jobs than the fact that we did them. I've been playing along for a couple of days, taking him through stuff as I

tease out information. I think Asano knows I'm doing it, but hasn't let the guy know for some reason. Which means he's either on the level or is playing a game his partner doesn't know about."

"Could be either," Sophie said. "When I was talking to him, he knew I wouldn't trust him, so he cranked up the shadiness until I didn't know what to think."

"So, what's the move?"

"I don't see any good angles," Sophie said. "The deal with Ventress is burned, so even if we get away from these people, the streets aren't safe. We could try the plan to leave the city, but we'd have not much more than food and a map."

"Then what?" Belinda asked. "Going along with this guy's plan puts us right into his hands. No way out if he's playing us or any of a dozen other things go wrong."

"Did they tell you they would let you go?" Sophie asked.

"Yeah. They said I should stay here, where Ventress and Silva wouldn't dare come for me."

"What do you think?"

"I think the one I'm worried about is you, Soph."

Sophie sighed.

"We've been running further into the fire for a while now, to escape being cooked," Sophie said. "It could be that all we have left is to choose who bakes us, if we can choose even that much."

Belinda nodded.

"I think maybe we take a risk with this guy. Jory and Janice have known him for months. The whole time he's apparently been coming in and healing people for free."

"Sounds like he's running some kind of scam."

"I know. But Jory sees him as a friend, as does that partner of his, Clive. I know Jory's alright, and I like Clive. He's refreshingly straightforward."

"That's not a lot to bet the future on."

Belinda hopped down off the table and walked over to Sophie, giving her a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder.

"You know why I like Jory? Most people I've met, us included, are out for themselves. Those that don't have are trying to get. Those that have are trying to get more. Jory could have set up shop on the Island, selling his alchemy to rich folks, but he didn't. He came here, and he helps people."

"He can't be doing too badly," Sophie said. "The money to rebuild it all came from somewhere."

“It came from Asano,” Belinda said. “At least according to Janice. Asano just gave Jory the money. No loan, no questions asked.”

“Why would he do that?”

“I think, and I’m just guessing here, that Asano looks at Jory the way I do.”

“With girlish affection?”

“Shut up. I think he sees someone who helps people. Even the god of healing sees him like that, so why not this guy? And if his response to that is to give Jory money to do it more, how bad can he be?”

“That’s a lot of ifs and guesses,” Sophie said.

“If you have anything more to work off, this is the time for sharing.”

Sophie ran her hands over her face.

“It’s not much to put myself in the hands of a stranger over.”

“I think we’re already in his hands,” Belinda said. “It’s just a matter of how much we struggle.”

“So, what do we do?”

“I think we go along for now,” Belinda said. “Those tracking bracelets they give to indentures can’t be that hard to beat. But I won’t be the one wearing it, so you decide what we’re going to do. I’ll back you, whatever it is.”

“Enter,” Arella’s voice came through the door and Jason showed himself into her office. Jason was a little surprised to find the deputy director also present, sitting behind her own desk.

“You met my father, then,” Arella said as soon as Jason closed the door. He glanced at the deputy director before turning his gaze back to Arella.

“I did,” he said. “I like him. He seems to care about you a great deal.”

“What is it you want in return for silence?” she asked.

“I’m not a blackmailer, Director. I would like to avoid any bureaucratic roadblocks in securing the indenture of the thief, but since that will aggravate Lucian Lamprey, that’s exactly what you want. And you owe me that much.”

“I owe you?”

“You sent people to interfere with my completion of a contract you posted. That’s unprofessional.”

Arella reluctantly nodded.

“I’ll acknowledge the point,” she said. “Who told you about that clause in the service agreement?”

“I found it myself.”

“You read it?” Genevieve asked. It was the first time the elderly deputy director had entered the conversation.

“That’s right,” Jason told her.

“Nobody reads it.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Jason said. “You should see legal documents where I come from.”

“You know placing yourself between Lucian Lamprey and his objective may not be the safest position,” Arella said, pulling the conversation back on track. Jason turned to look at her.

“If I don’t, who will?” he asked.

“Does it really matter?”

“I put this woman in a situation where Lamprey can potentially get his claws into her. That makes it my responsibility to see that he doesn’t.”

“Your responsibility?”

“Yes.”

“You realise people are placed in horrifying situations every day?” she asked.

“They aren’t my responsibility. Not until I have the power to really change things.”

“And when you do, what makes you think you know best?”

“Some things are just obviously wrong, whatever world you come from.”

“So you’re going to come here and tell us right from wrong?”

“It’s easy to excuse away doing nothing,” Jason said. “It’s our tradition, our culture, our values. That does not make it acceptable to hand someone over to a predator.”

“You’re naïve,” Arella said. “It’s easy to do more harm than good, bumbling around with no idea of the realities.”

“I’ve seen the realities, Director. I covered up crimes by a man who tried to have me killed. I did that because the only people who would be hurt if I tried to do something about it would be the victims. Yet this woman I just had locked up in the tower has been hunted for months. Why? For taking things that didn’t belong to her? That’s the easy excuse that lets a pervert with power claw after her. Thadwick Mercer tried to have me murdered and the best I can hope for is that him Mum tells him off. Every time I kill people in job lots, I get a promotion. But gods forbid a poor person take a rich person’s stuff. That’s pretext enough to hand them over to whatever filthy lech has the power to demand it. This whole thing was over hunting down the victims and you’re going to tell me I don’t know right from wrong?”

“Are you quite done, Mr Asano?”

Jason let out a tension-relieving sigh.

“You did ask,” he said.

“I think we’re done here. You can have your thief, Mr Asano. The agreement with the city is quite clear on this point, and I will see it is enforced. Try not to make more trouble than you have to.”

The Adventure Society holding facility was a stone tower. Not the usual Greenstone, but a dark grey. It saw little use and had little capacity, which is why the Ustei had been penned up in the marshalling yard. Only the Ustei leadership had been held there. An adventurer entered, shoving two surly men in manacles ahead of him. Inside the only door was a small administrative area, where an Adventure Society functionary sat behind protective glass.

“I need to put these two in lockup,” the adventurer told Albert, the man behind the glass.

Albert regularly worked the jobs hall a lot and had an eye for faces, but he didn’t recognise this adventurer. That had been happening a lot lately. With so many people on the expedition, the director had been pressing the more nominal members of the Society into service. This adventurer looked more rough and tumble than the usual noble fop, though.

“I’ll need to see a copy of the contract they were taken under,” Albert told him.

“No contract,” the adventurer said. “These two idiots tried to mug the wrong guy.”

“If it isn’t contract related,” Albert said, “then we can’t keep them here. Take them to the courthouse gaol.”

“I’ve got stuff to do. Just let me stash them here and we can sort the rest out later.”

“This isn’t a hostel,” Albert said. “We’re not taking them.”

“You’d rather I let two hardened criminals loose right here?”

“If you like,” Albert said. “We’re in the middle of the Adventure Society. If they have half a mind, they’ll run like there’s a fire behind them.”

The adventurer threw Albert a sneer, but dragged the two men away. Around an hour later he was back. Along with his two prisoners, he had brought Guy Spalding, the Adventure Society official that was Albert’s supervisor.

“Bertinelli,” Spalding scolded Albert. “This adventurer’s prisoners need to be taken upstairs.”

“Sir, he didn’t have a contract.”

“I don’t care,” Spalding said. “Have them sent up, right now.”

Albert frowned.

“If you insist, sir, but I’ll need to process them first.”

“Don’t bother with that; just send them up. On my authority.”

“With respect, sir, you have the authority to tell me to do my job. You do not have the authority to tell me not to.”

“What? If you know what’s good for you, you’ll do as I say.”

“With respect, sir, I strongly suspect what’s good for me is not factoring heavily into your reasoning.”

“Are you going to do it, or not?”

“No, sir, I’m not. It’s quite obvious something shady is happening and I suggest you give it up before you do something that comes back on you.”

Spalding glared at Albert through the glass, then turned on the adventurer who had brought him there.

“Let’s go,” Spalding barked.

“You’re joking,” the adventurer said to Spalding.

“I said let’s go!”

Shaking his head, the adventurer followed reluctantly. Outside, the adventurer turned on Spalding.

“What the hell was that? I did what you said and you messed it up twice. Now there’s no way to get to the girl quietly.”

“Don’t talk at me like I’m another one of Silva’s lackeys,” Spalding warned.

“A man who gambles as hard and as badly as you,” the adventurer said, “should be concerned when he can’t keep his promises.”

“Don’t threaten me,” Spalding said. “Look where you are.”

“And how would it go for you if your new director found out how deep in you are? The world’s changing, Spalding. Being on the take isn’t as easy as it used to be. You have to know what you’re doing, these days, and you’ve had it too easy for too long. Silva isn’t his father, willing to indulge your whims. You need to show us you can adapt to the times, or things are going to get very nasty for you.”